

## Gender and Sports in Contemporary Society

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### Abstract

*The society expects males and females to adopt, believe in, and fulfill specific gender roles and stereotypes that have been established. Generally, males are expected to be strong, independent, and athletic, whereas females are expected to be quiet, obedient, attractive and nurturers. Society demands compliance to the enforced gender order. When these gender norms are violated, it is common for labels to be given, questions to be asked, and people to be ridiculed. Over the past few centuries, gender roles of men and women have started to change greatly in our society, and especially in the world of sports. Also, female athletes are beginning to establish themselves in the sports world. With the change in gender roles in our society, many female athletes have started to view themselves in a different manner. Even though women athletes have become more prominent in society, many wonder how these women feel about the evolution of gender roles, and how they have affected the perceptions of women athletes. In recent years, there has been a significant shift from advocating for 'gender equity in sport' towards using 'sport for gender equity and personal development'.*

**Keywords:** Gender roles, women athletes, society, femininity, gender stereotypes.

### 1. Introduction

The culture of sport is a key terrain for studying and understanding gender. Sport provides a unique way of understanding the ways in which society constructs the social bodies of men and women who participate in sport and how we assign masculinity and femininity to those bodies (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009). Sports as a male dominated system, which constantly reconstructs hegemonic masculinity through symbolic presentation, has been the focus of gender research since approximately 1980 (Evert, and Cynthia, 2007).

According to Chalabaev, Sarrazin, Stone and Cury (2008), **the** society expects males and females to adopt, believe in, and fulfill specific gender roles and stereotypes that have been established. In the both developed and developing countries, males are expected to be strong, independent, and athletic, whereas females are expected to be quiet, obedient, attractive, and nurturers. Society demands compliance to the enforced gender order. Throughout the past 100 years, gender roles of men and women have started to change greatly in our society, and especially in the world of sports (Eitzen, 2010). Recently, female athletes have made great strides in gaining equal representation, and media coverage, in comparison to the past. The evolution of gender roles in our society has shown a significant change in how women are represented in sports. The growth of women's sports has been shown by the creation of various professional sports leagues for women including the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA) Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) and the Women Football organized by FIFA (Eitzen, 2010).

With the evolution of gender roles in our society, we have started to see women participate in certain sports such as soccer, hockey, athletics, boxing etc; that were at one time only associated with one gender. The definition of a female athlete has also changed. Women athletes today are not only seen in a feminine manner, but also as a more emotional and physically empowered individual that younger athletes can look up to. Looking into future, women's sports look to become even more prominent in our society, based on how gender roles are considerably changing not only in sports, but in other areas of our culture (Eitzen, 2010; Sancar and Sever, 2009; Saavedra 2010). However, in this paper, the

following subheadings will be presented and discussed in relation to gender and sports: defining concepts, traditional female stereotypes, female athletics stereotypes: historical progress, gender roles in women sports and the roles of sports in addressing gender issues.

## **2. Concept of Gender and Sports**

According to Hardin and Greer (2009) 'Gender', refers to the socially-constructed roles of and relationships between men and women; Gender concerns men and women, including conceptions of both femininity and masculinity. The difference between 'gender' and 'sex' is that the latter refers only to biological differences. Gender does not mean focusing solely on women or females, but rather on the inequalities between males and females, and should not be confused with feminism or women's studies (Connell, 2008). Sancar and Sever (2009), stated that the analyses of gender differences often show a disadvantaged and weaker position of women and girls in social, political, economic, legal, educational and physical issues. This is why there is a tendency for gender discussions and interventions to focus on correcting these imbalances by specifically targeting women and girls.

Sport (or Sports) is all forms of usually competitive physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim to use, maintain or improve physical ability and skills while providing entertainment to participants, and in some cases, spectators (Eitzen, 2010). Also, sports is an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment.

## **3. Traditional Female Stereotypes**

From birth until death, people are bombarded with gender stereotypes. Once a new baby's sex is revealed, the baby is dressed either in blue or pink, given gifts of trucks and soldiers or dolls and animals, and referred to as strong and alert or soft and delicate (Schmalz and Davison, 2012). Actions and ideas such as these are only the first of many gender stereotypes that a new child will encounter throughout their lifetime. Males are expected to demonstrate certain characteristics and behaviours that are "masculine", while females are held accountable for being "feminine" (Constantinou, Manson and Silverman, 2009).

Society expects males and females fulfill specific gender roles and stereotypes that have been established. Generally, males are expected to be strong, independent, and athletic, whereas females are expected to be quiet, obedient, attractive and nurturers. Society demands compliance to the enforced gender order. When these gender norms are violated, it is common for labels to be given (i.e. lesbian), questions to be asked ("Are you sure that is not a boy in the net?"), and people to be ridiculed ("a girl playing football – what a butch"). (Constantinou, Manson and Silverman, 2009) While "traditional" gender stereotypes have remained fairly constant over the past few centuries, they have also been challenged and confronted by many women and feminists. One specific area in which traditional gender stereotypes have been evaluated and analyzed, is sports and physical activities (Gillenstam and Henriksson-Larsen 2008). Comparing traditional female gender stereotypes with those of the 21st century women in sports, it is clear that female athletes are beginning to establish themselves in the sports world. Their ability to challenge sexist barriers and restrictive notions about women's physical appearance, athletic ability, and participation in sports, is evident through their increased involvement in sports.

Traditionally, females have been expected to wear dresses, cook and clean, raise children, maintain a beautiful and delicate body, and remain passive, moral, and pure (Brady, 2005; Clark and Paechter, 2007; Hardin and Greer, 2009; and Hargreaves, 2008). Deemed to be the "weaker sex"- physically, mentally, and emotionally, women have been stereotyped as being feminine. Femininity, according to Fasting (2004), is the issue of what is feminine in appearance and behaviour (i.e. being attractive, carefully groomed, submissive, and nurturing women). When the principle of femininity is applied, females are expected to live up to these specific gender roles that are held by both men and women in mainstream society. This expectation of femininity often results in women being dissuaded from lifting weights, sweating, grunting, being aggressive, participating and competing in sports and physical activities. The main reason for this is because society expects women to be "ladylike", not demonstrate characteristics that are defined as being masculine. However, when women do "cross the line" and exhibit these so-called "manly traits", their gender identity, sexual orientation, values, and social roles are often questioned (Constantinou, Manson and Silverman, 2009). Negative stigmas are often attached to athletic women, and consequently are used as a mechanism to control and limit women's participation in sports.

#### **4. Female Athletics Stereotypes: Historical Progress**

Sports and athletics have traditionally been restricted to and associated with males, masculinity, and the “manly domain”. In their works, Giuliano, Turner, Lundquist, and Knight (2010) and Teetzel (2006) trace this pattern and highlight how sports have, over time, evolved for women. They point out that for centuries; athletics, competition, strength, and team sportsmanship have been deemed appropriate traits within the “masculine domain”. As a result, many girls and women avoided taking part in sports. It was not until the mid 1800’s that women began to accompany their male relatives to specific sporting events (such as horse races and baseball games) and participate in mild exercise such as dancing and ice-skating. Then, after the Civil War in the late 1800’s, women were finally given the opportunity to participate in organized sports. Golf, archery, and croquet, were the first sports to gain acceptance among women because they did not involve physical contact or strain. Because perspiring, physical contact, and competition were not socially acceptable “ladylike” behaviours, women’s physical recreation activities and opportunities were limited.

Furthermore, women were required to protect their reproductive systems, and activities such as these, allowed women to “play safely” (Clark and Paechter, 2007; Fasting, 2004). Before the end of the 19th century, the invention of the bicycle began to revolutionize women and their participation in physical activities. It is during this time that women adopted a freer style of dressing so that they could enjoy cycling, and other activities such as horseback riding, gymnastics, and skating. This major change not only allowed women to consider pursuing athletics (i.e. participation in basketball, baseball, track and field), but it also liberated them in other areas such as attire, roles, and professions (Harding and Whiteside, 2009). With these revolutionary changes, traditional gender stereotypes for females began to transform. The ideas that “girls don’t sweat”, “girls don’t run”, and “girls don’t get dirty”, began to be challenged and questioned in conjunction with being a female and being feminine. In the 1930’s, Mildred “Babe” Didrikson showed that women could successfully participate in competitive athletics (track and field, baseball, golf, swimming). After World War II women’s competitive collegiate sports began to emerge. And in the 1960 – 70’s, the women’s movement created new attitudes and demanded equal opportunities, funding, and facilities for women in sports. It was during this period that Billie Jean King defeated Bobby Riggs, a former men’s champion, in a tennis match called the Battle of the Sexes (Gilenstam and Henriksson-Larsen 2008).

More recently, increasing numbers of girls and women are participating in “traditional male sports”. Harding and Whiteside (2009), reported that the number of girls and women participating in recreational and competitive football, boxing, and wrestling, has grown. They also state that female participation in extreme sports (or “X sports”) such as snowboarding, skateboarding, and inline skating, has also increased. One factor that may contribute to this trend toward increased female athletes in a wider range of sports is the idea that borders between the sexes seem to be less patrolled among generation X’ers. Another factor may be that a broader definition of femininity is beginning to evolve as a result of women challenging the “traditional” gender stereotypes that used to define them. A broader definition allows for greater latitude in women’s ability to claim their own definitions of “womanhood” and “femininity”. A third factor may be that the presence of females in these types of sports helps break a lot of male-oriented and prescribed stereotypes and barriers; thus giving girls and women the courage and esteem to participate in a wide range of sports and physical activities. Such female athletes as Danica Patrick, Michelle Wie, and Gina Corano have made giant strides in sports in recent times.

#### **5. Gender Roles in Women’s Sports**

Throughout the past 100 years, gender roles of men and women have started to change greatly in our society, and especially in the world of sports. Recently, female athletes have made great strides in gaining equal representation, and media coverage, in comparison to the past, where there was little coverage of female athletics. In addition, women have begun to participate in many sports that have previously been male dominated. Some of these sports such as MMA, and hockey have been perceived as “manly” sports, and many feel that women should not participate in them due to their physically demanding nature (Gilenstam and Henriksson-Larsen 2008). However, even though many female athletes have been discouraged from participating in male dominated sports, women have continued to break stereotypes and cultural barriers that have prevented them from participating in “manly” sports. Female athletes such as Danica Patrick, Michelle Wie, and Gina Corano have become role models for many younger female athletes, by proving that they too can compete and succeed in sports that have been dominated by men (Giuliano, Turner, Lundquist, and Knight (2010). This shows how women have considerably changed how they are viewed in the sporting world, by challenging stereotypes against them. With the evolution of gender roles in our society, we have started to see women participate in certain

sports that were at one time only associated with one gender.

### 5.1 Perceptions of Female Athletes

With the change in gender roles in our society, many female athletes have started to view themselves in a different manner. Even though women athletes have become more prominent in society, many wonder how these women feel about the evolution of gender roles, and how they have affected the perceptions of women athletes. A recent study was done by Giuliano, Turner, Lundquist, and Knight (2010) to determine the different gender perceptions female hockey players have about their sport, and other female athletes. This study is interesting due to the fact that hockey is a male dominated sport, and women have only recently started to participate in it. The study found that women ice hockey players do not consider themselves the same as male hockey players. Women in the study felt that they were inferior to male players, and could never be as good as them. This was supported by many of the female players who view hockey as a highly physical sport, and that women cannot match their physicality on the ice due to their smaller size, and lack of aggressiveness. However, the women hockey players in the study did agree that they enjoy challenging gender stereotypes against women. Many of the players felt that although they may be inferior to the male players, they still felt they were different than other female athletes. The article expresses their feelings by stating, "The players see themselves as different from other women, in a positive way. They do not want to be like ultra-feminine, unpractical women with long nails, high heels and sensitive (to criticism). In their opinion, female ice hockey players represent a version of femininity that is more like men" (Keeler 2007). This shows how the stereotypical image of women has changed, and female hockey players choose to play a sport dominated by men because they feel more empowerment while playing. Some of the female players thought that other sports that are not entirely associated with men (example h. Volleyball and handball) were more feminine, and that players within those sports would not feel the same sense of strength and physicality, than they would playing hockey.

The evolution of gender roles in our society has shown a significant change in how women are represented in sports. The growth of women's sports has been shown by the creation of various professional sports leagues for women including the WNBA, and the LPGA. In addition, because of the change of equal representation in women's sports, more female athletes have begun to participate in sports compared to those of the past (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009). The large increase of female participation in athletics seems to be related to the rapid growth of many professional women's sports leagues, and the increased coverage and representation of women athletes in the world of sports. In addition, women have started to completely change how they are viewed in the sports world by participating in male dominated sports (Gilenstam and Henriksson-larsen, 2008). This shows how women have considerably changed how they are viewed in the sporting world, by challenging stereotypes against them. With the evolution of gender roles in our society, we have started to see women participate in certain sports that were at one time only associated with one gender. The definition of a female athlete has also changed. Women athletes today are not only seen in a feminine manner, but also as a more emotional and physically empowered individual that younger athletes can look up to. Looking into future, women's sports look to become even more prominent in our society, based on how gender roles are considerably changing not only in sports, but in other areas of our culture (Schmalz and Davison, 2012).

## 6. The Role of Sport in Addressing Gender Issues

According to Hardin and Whiteside (2009), in recent years, there has been a significant shift from advocating for 'gender equity in sport' towards using 'sport for gender equity and personal development'. This sub-section contains some of the evidence of this shift so far.

Research into the extent to which sport and physical activity has a positive impact on health has shown that involvement in regular physical activity enhances physical and mental health and well-being, including among women and girls (Auster, 2008; Brady, 2005; Clark and Paechter, 2007). Strong evidence supports the role regular exercise can play in controlling levels of fat, reducing the risk of lung and breast cancers.

Research from both Western and non-Western contexts have shown that female athletes are less likely to exhibit risky sexual behaviour; For example, they were shown to have fewer sexual partners and were more likely to use contraceptive than their counterparts who did not participate in sports (Teetzel, 2006; Sancar and Sever, 2009). Also, studies among young women in South Africa indicated that athletes from one sample were more likely to have fewer children than non-athlete females from the same region. Studies from among young women in high-income countries show that female athletes are less likely to consume drugs (such as cocaine, marijuana, etc.) than non-athletes (Teetzel,

2006).

There is an indication that regular physical activity may decrease or slow down the onset of osteopenia and osteoporosis in women (Crissey and Honea, 2006). Regular physical activity coupled with a calcium-rich diet can increase bone mineral density, reducing the risk of developing bone disorders and fractures among older women.

Some research using the concept of self-esteem suggests that girls and women who participate in sport and physical activity in both developed and developing countries demonstrate higher self-esteem as well as improved self-perception, self-worth, self-efficacy and so on (Constantinou, Manson, and Silverman, 2009; Auster, 2008; Brady, 2005; Chalabaev, Sarrazin, Stone, and Cury, 2008). These improvements are associated with enhanced feelings of accomplishment, perceptions of improved physical appearance and commitment to exercise. Evidence from developing countries shows that involvement in organised sports activities helped to enhance girls' sense of agency, self-empowerment and personal freedom (Everhart, Robert, Cynthia 2007).

## 7. Conclusion

Girls, women, and femininity have been defined in relation and contrast to men and masculinity. Sports and the sports world have been tied with the masculine domain, and there has been a legacy of bias against the female athlete. In the past few decades, this trend has been confronted and challenged. Girls and women have "tackled" narrow, negative, and limiting concepts and ideas that they should not participate in sports, sweat, show aggression, or compete, and begun to include physical strength and athletic prowess in the definition of femininity. The large increase of female participation in athletics seems to be related to the rapid growth of many professional women's sports leagues, and the increased coverage and representation of women athletes in the world of sports. In addition, women have started to completely change how they are viewed in the sports world by participating in male dominated sports. This shows how women have considerably changed how they are viewed in the sporting world, by challenging stereotypes against them. With the evolution of gender roles in our society, we have started to see women participate in certain sports that were at one time only associated with one gender. Women athletes today are not only seen in a feminine manner, but also as a more emotional and physically empowered individual that younger athletes can look up to. Looking into future, women's sports look to become even more prominent in our society, based on how gender roles are considerably changing not only in sports, but in other areas of our culture.

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